

New Visitor Center becoming reality

by Leah Eskelin



The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center is under construction on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna.

Up from the icy ground adjacent to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters in Soldotna, a building has grown. Through snow fall and rain, during negative temperature days and unseasonably warm meltdowns, the construction crew has been on site, dedicating long hours to what will be the hub of Refuge visitor services by the end of the year.

The new Refuge Visitor Center will house state-of-the-art exhibits that highlight the biodiversity of the Kenai, explore its ecosystems from the Harding Icefield, through the forests, rivers, wetlands and lakes to the Cook Inlet, and introduce visitors of all ages to what the residents of this great land already know: the Kenai is extraordinarily special. Beyond the exhibit hall, the new building will provide meeting space for public events, an inviting lobby and masonry fireplace set into a wall of windows that bring the beauty of the boreal forest inside. Natural light is celebrated, and its welcome dance across the polished concrete floors will reveal painstakingly installed sockeye salmon silhouettes that gather in imaginary eddies and pools all around the building's public floor space.

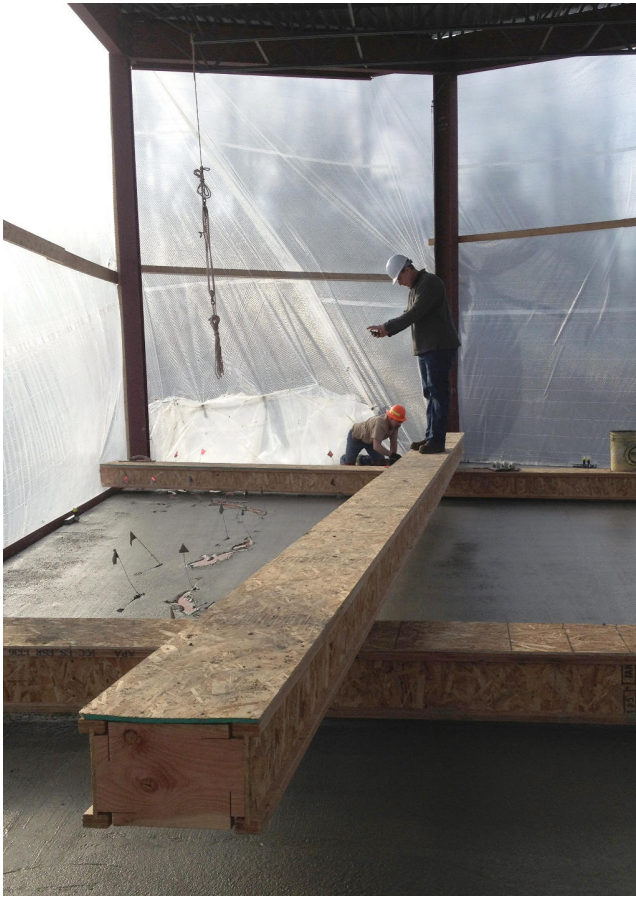
If you visit the Headquarters building now, it looks like the new Visitor Center is a concrete fortress, short on windows and heavy on steel. However, what appears a finished structure is still in a state of transformation. A third of the concrete walls will disappear below grade, covered by landscaping once the foun-

dation work is complete. The steel structure rising above the walls is the underpinning for a green roof, sown with grasses that will further dissolve the line between building and nature, where butterflies and dragonflies will flit and flutter in the summer sun, and where sod forms a natural insulation that advances the project's mission of becoming LEED-certified as a green, environmentally-responsible building. A south-exposure terrace will provide excellent visitor gathering space outdoors, while also letting the sun into the lobby, and connecting the indoors with outside through massive windows that are yet to be installed.

Adjacent to the new Visitor Center, a small pond sits tucked against the alders. This is a bioswale, where runoff from the parking lot collects and filters into the ground, protecting the land from flood and pollutants in an eco-friendly way. Hidden under the shallow water is a structure that feeds water away from the building through buried pipework. Not unlike other building features that will be hidden from view, considerable attention has been paid to systems and structures to improve the visitor's experience and environmental impact of the project.

What is yet to be revealed are the technological and artistic details that will make the building unique. A handsome bull moose statue will stand at the entrance, followed in line by migrating salmon as visitors make their way to the front door. Solar panels in the parking lot will follow the sun, providing 10% of anticipated annual energy needs.

It is exciting to watch these building features appear as construction progresses. The finishing touches are expected to be complete by fall, with a community opening in December. Between then and now, more than just the construction crew is hard at work preparing from the public opening of this new space. Refuge rangers and educators are busy planning new interactive events and programming. The building will come alive through these programs. It expands our ability to provide public talks and walks to larger groups, reintroduces hands-on visitor center-based field trip opportunities, and has initiated the redesign of our Junior Ranger program.



Contractors install salmon forms into the Refuge Visitor Center exhibit hall's concrete floor.

Like wildlife finding just the right fit in their environment, you, too, can find a niche at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Visitor Center project

opens the Refuge to a whole new group of residents and seasonal visitors through volunteerism. Volunteer opportunities abound, from staffing the front desk and helping during public programs to leading guided walks or hosting a summer campground. If you are interested in getting involved as a Refuge volunteer, we look forward to hearing from you! Contact me, Leah Eskelin, at 907-260-2811 to discuss visitor center volunteer opportunities starting this fall.

Don't want to wait for the visitor center to open to begin your volunteer experience? We are seeking summertime campground hosts at Hidden Lake Campground right now. This position is traditionally filled by a host couple with their own RV or travel trailer and runs from May 14th to September 1st, 2014. Contact Michelle Ostrowski at 907-260-2839 or email michelle_ostrowski@fws.gov for more information about the camp host program.

The Refuge Facebook page is the go-to source for all the Visitor Center sneak peeks from now through the end of construction. Updates, photos and announcements will be posted often. Now that the floors have been installed, walls, finishes, ceiling and windows will be next. Be sure to watch the progress both online on [Facebook](#) and the [Refuge website](#) and in person at the current Visitor Center as we prepare to welcome you, your family, friends and summer visitors to the new building this December.

Leah Eskelin is a Visitor Services Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge and Visitor Center project, visit kenai.fws.gov or like [the Refuge on Facebook](#).